

Phone conversation between the National Academy Foundation (Colleen Devery, Assistant Vice President, Strategic Initiatives and Administration) and GiveWell (Elie Hassenfeld and Simon Knutsson) on August 26, 2010

GiveWell: What differentiates National Academy Foundation (NAF) career academies from other career academies?

NAF: One of our principals gave testimony before the senate that lays out the differences pretty clearly. I can send you the testimony. Career Academies have been around for 40 years, and there are standards in the field to define a career academy: it has a defined curriculum and work-based learning opportunities for students, and it is structured as a small learning community. NAF career academies have these and some more standards, for example, our career academies have a formal advisory board, which represents the local community.

Moreover, NAF evaluates our career academies more rigorously and our career academies are more structured. And we focus more on technical assistance and professional development. NAF is almost 30 years old and although all these elements were present in the first academy, they have become more structured over time.

GiveWell: Does NAF confirm that your career academies are running in the way you intended? What do you do to monitor and evaluate your career academies?

NAF: We absolutely monitor since, for example, leadership changes in a school can have big effects.

We have regional directors responsible for maintaining contact with career academies in their respective region, and for directing the academies to people who can help. And we're piloting a deeper set of supports: where we now have one person we will expand to a team of 5 to 6 experts. We will still have the director but also more dedicated support on the ground.

The way we monitor, from a data perspective, is that we have a proprietary database where each school is required to enter data on number of students, courses, grade point averages, graduation rate, and teachers teaching the courses.

We're able to step up that effort because of technology that is available to us now. And schools also need to report this kind of data to their communities. As a third party in the system, one struggle for us is that since all of data is entered by the school head-administrator, and the information is kept in the school's information system, there is a place where there can be a human error. So we have to validate the information. We've been trying to navigate this issue for the last 5 years, and we're now working with the company ConnectEDU, which offers web based platforms for students and guidance counselors to manage the courses the students are taking and their college applications. We're working with districts to get them signed on, and then we can look at this data to

evaluate our academies and direct technical assistance. Though NAF can access student-level data, the personal indentifying student information is not seen by NAF.

We have been consistently monitoring programmatic data, and our regional directors know in detail what is going on in each academy.

And, we've been working with MDRC on a formative evaluation of the new engineering academy.

GiveWell: Can you share that data?

NAF: I can provide you with information on the NAF career academies self-assessment tool, sample data from one (anonymous) academy, and the aggregate data. We piloted it in 2009 with about half of the NAF career academies. We are currently refining the tool through a rigorous validation process, involving interviews across the country. I can send you a document on the validation process.

GiveWell: What (else) does you research department do?

NAF: The research department is a new department. About 6 months ago, we hired a research associate and in September we are hiring a Assistant VP of Research.

We're involved in a follow-up study with MDRC looks at some of the factors that may have led to great results they found in the randomized controlled trial (RCT). I can send you more information on this follow-up study.

Another thing we're doing is working with peer organizations around the country and other large providers of the school model. At the encouragement of the Gates Foundation, we're working with other national organizations to create a system to track alumni (last year of high school and onwards) so districts can see what's happening to students.

The new field services model is working with a research group to develop a formative evaluation of it.

GiveWell: So you didn't track alumni previously?

NAF: Not systematically. We commissioned a study from the Institute on Education and the Economy to look for outcomes for NAF students.

GiveWell: Is the full study available?

NAF: Yes, we can send it to you, it was published in 2003.

GiveWell: Why do career academies work? One hypothesis is that the education is tailored to the local labor market so that students can go into those careers.

NAF: One thing to keep in mind with the MDRC study is that it was a 10-year evaluation that came out 2 years ago, and our model has continued to evolve. Some of the strong academic parts of our current model weren't part of the program that the students in the MDRC randomized study experienced. So, that there were only strong academic outcomes for students at high risk rather than students overall is something that might change if the study were done today.

We'd like to undertake another study of our model as it is now. And, we're excited to participate in MDRC's follow-up study.

While we know there's a dearth of women and minorities represented in the engineering field, the most important thing to us is not that they can become engineers, but that they can pursue the careers they choose, that they spend time in school on things that they see as relevant in the rest of the world, and that they further their understanding of where they can go in the world

GiveWell: We are very interested in what the NAF career academies model was during the RCT by MDRC and how it is similar and different now.

NAF: We don't have a document directly about that but I can send you our theory of change that represents how we see the model now. One obvious difference is that the academies in the MDRC study were 2-year academies and now they are 3 to 4 years and we only open 4-year academies.

We also have an increased emphasis on educational outcomes now.

The curriculum we're currently offering to academies has all been revised and developed along new guidelines in the last 4 years and designed to prepare students for whatever post-secondary options they'd like to pursue. The curriculum is different from what we had at the time the students in the MDRC study were in school.

GiveWell: Can you send information on all the criteria the curriculum meets now?

NAF: Yes.

GiveWell: You mentioned that you want students prepared for both work and college. But the main finding of the MDRC study was that the NAF academies improved students' earnings, not their educational outcomes. Is NAF excited about these results or do you think they show you don't accomplish what you hope in preparing students for college?

NAF: We are excited about the MDRC results, they are very significant. Almost no other education intervention has been able to show the labor market impacts, especially for low-income young men that NAF career academies did in the study. We certainly would have like to see demonstrated academic impacts on high school degree attainment and college enrollment and completion.

The other piece we critically took away from the MDRC results is that there were impacts on educational outcomes in the group that was most at risk, and that's put a renewed focus on our work to make sure we're directing our resources to students who need them the most.

GiveWell: Why do you change your model after the unusually rigorous MDRC evaluation found positive impact? Aren't you worried that the changes to your model can reduce the impacts?

NAF: We think our model could have even more impact so continue to seek to strengthen it, and we want to continually evaluate what is happening and use that information to guide our model's evolution.

GiveWell: Is NAF mainly helping existing career academies meeting NAF's requirements so that they become NAF career academies, or do you mainly help create new NAF career academies where there was no previous career academy?

NAF: It's a mix each year, I can send you information on the breakdown for the last year.

GiveWell: Do you have anything written on the differences and similarities between NAF career academies and regular career academies?

NAF: We don't have anything directly on that. But papers on career academies may shed light on that. I can send you a paper by Betsy Brand [Executive Director, American Youth Policy Forum] related to the 40th anniversary of career academies; and a paper by Stern, Dayton, and Raby.

GiveWell: What would you do with new donations? If NAF received, for example, 10–20% more funds, would that lead to more NAF career academies?

NAF: We have a lot of new initiatives that are not entirely funded. We are planning to create a new theme: health sciences, which we are hoping to fundraise for in the next 6–8 months. We also applied for an i3 [Investing in Innovation Fund] grant, which we didn't receive. We are looking to build on the work of MDRC. And we look to strengthen the support of internships. In December, we are also hopefully going to start new 5-year business plans, aiming to grow academies and their quality.

GiveWell: Can you share your i3 application?

NAF: Yes.